Fighting Officials Nothing New For Embattled Life Reporter

By JACK WARDLAW

David L. Chandler, the embattled Life Magazine reporter currently at odds with some Louisiana public officials headed by the governor, has been down this road before.

Chandler's career as a newsman, part of which was spent with the States-Item, is studded with controversies between himself and public servants. In the past, Chandler has always come out on top.

His current principal adversary is Gov. John J. McKeithen, who was stung by an article in the April 10 issue of Life which charged widespread Mafia influence in Louisiana governmental affairs. The article was prepared by Chandler and Life's investigative reporting team.

McKEITHEN struck back with a libel suit and a legislative probe. At one point last week, the governor said candidly the purpose of the probe was to put Chandler in jail. He backed down the next day after leaders of the investigation pointed out that such statements could aid Chandler in his fight to avoid testifying before the committee.

Ironically, Chandler served McKeithen as a special investigator during an earlier controversy over a 1967 Life article on Louisiana Mafia operation. McKeithen then pledged he would clean up organized crime. The current article charges the governor failed to keep his word.

"Thus far the committee has seemed more interested in finding out who our sources are in government and punishing them than in correcting the obvious misdeeds," said Chandler.

Yesterday, Chandler and the committee agreed on a 10-day truce during which he will talk with the probers in an informal session at 8 a.m. tomorrow. Since he will not be under oath, he cannot be charged with perjury or contempt. But if the investigators are not satisfied with his answers, they can reinstate their subpoenas and try again to get him into a formal session.

WHETHER the committee can succeed in getting Chandler under oath is in the hands of the courts. But Chandler has been faced with similar situations twice before, and won.

Chandler's love affair with the news profession began a dozen years ago under unusual circumstances in Panama City, Fla., and its course has seldom run smoothly.

Born in Cincinnati May 26, 1935, Chandler was a dropout from high school and later from college (Boston University) where he had studied math. After a merchant marine stint, he found himself nearly broke on the beach at Panama City in 1958.

"I couldn't find any fishing jobs. I noticed a brand new newspaper building, and figured a new building meant new jobs," said Chandler.

PRETENDING he had a wealth of newspaper experience (he had none), he talked the Panama City News-Herald into signing him on as a sportswriter. He soon was writing news and making a nuisance of himself to North Florida public officials.

He did a series on official corruption centering around a sheriff involved in the manufacture and sale of moonshine liquor. Immediately, the local district attorney threatened to jail Chandler unless he revealed his sources. Chandler refused.

The confrontation was resolved when Chandler's prime source a police detective named Duke Newcome, revealed himself. He was fired, but joined the paper's investigative staff and he and Chandler continued their exposes.

"He was a gutsy guy," Chandler recalls. The newspaper subsequently was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for the investigation.

Chandler by then had moved on to the West Palm Beach Times. And later, in November, 1960, joined the States-Item as a copy editor.

He found desk work confining and after about a year returned to reporting, winning numerous Press Club awards for his work.

One of his assignments was to cover the district attorney's office, and he and District Attorney Jim Garrison became close personal friends. The friendship ended abruptly in 1967.

Meanwhile, Chandler had left the States-Item in late 1964 to become a free-lance writer, a correspondent for Life and to write plays.

Chandler broke with Garrison over the Clay L. Shaw case. Garrison charged Shaw with conspiring to kill President John F. Kennedy. This was too much for Chandler, who also had been looking into the Kennedy assassination and knew the details of Garrison's probe.

IN ONE of the many court proceedings in the Garrison probe, Chandler testified about a conversation he had with Garrison prior to Shaw's arrest. (Garrison's case against Shaw rested on a con-

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tention that Shaw was the real identity of a shadowy figure called Clay Bertrand who attempted to arrange counsel for Lee Harvey Oswald after Kennedy's death.)

Feeling that Garrison had charged Shaw on flimsy evidence, Chandler, a friend of Shaw's, broke with the DA and was strongly critical of the entire investigation. (Shaw was acquitted of the charges on March 1, 1969.)

The Garrison-Chandler quarrel over Shaw came in early 1967. Later that year, their differences over organized crime made headlines in a furor over another Life expose.

Life ran a series of a three articles charging organized crime, under the aegis of Carlos Marcello, was rampant in the New Orleans area. Garrison subpoenaed Chandler, who had participated in gathering material for the articles, before the grand jury. Chandler refused to appear on ground that the DA bore him "personal ill will" and be feared he would be indicted for perjury.

THE MATTER was in litigation for several months before Federal District Judge James A. Comiskey on March 11, 1968, ruled that Chandler did not have to appear.

Gov. McKeithen got involved in that case, too. When the article appeared, he first denied it, then flew to New York for a conference with the editors of Life. After that meeting, he reversed himself, said the charges were true, and pledged action to clean organized crime influences out of Louisiana.

At that time, be named Chandler as a special investigator.

Now, Chandler is in court again with McKeithen as his adversary.

Personally, Chandler is a brash, energetic individual who seems to thrive on controversy. He is deeply concerned about organized crime and its influence on society.

"I think when people talk about organized crime, they should focus on the central issue, which is political corruption. A corrupt politician is the truest of villains . . . because he has sworn to uphold laws.

"He is the one that betrays the democratic process by serving masters other than the people," Chandler said.

ON THE current committee, be said he is "curious how they can question people such as police chiefs, sheriffs and the governor without any prior investigation. Without an investigation, they don't know wbat questions to ask."

Describing his political philosophy as "libertarinan", Chandler said he believes the back of organized crime can be broken without interfering with the civil liberties of innocent people. "That's the only way to do it — within the framework of the Bill of Rigbts."

Chandler is an avid reader, particulary in the fields of archeology, politics and history, notably military history. He's also a mean chess player, and used to oppose Garrison across the chessboard.

He has completed five plays, none of them as yet produced. He said June Havoc, artistic director of Repertory Theater, New Orleans, has accepted one for presentation bere based on the slaying of New Orleans Police Chief David C. Hennessy on Oct. 15, 1890.

He is also writing a book, already sold to a publishing house, about secret societies in the 19tb century.

Two years ago, Chandler ran for a post on the city's Human Relations Commission. He lost.

With Life, Chandler is a correspondent under contract to the investigative department, rather than a regular staff member. Since joining the magazine in 1964, he was worked on such major stories as the Star of India jewel theft in Florida, the Selma-Montgomery civil rights march and the Dominican Republic revolution.

IN 1965, he was asked to entertain a tourist whose mother worked for the Paris bureau of Life. The tourist turned out to be Patricia Moran, an eye-catching beauty with blonde hair and an engaging accent.

"Faced with the problem of entertaining a Parisian accustomed to the best in night clubs, restaurants, and theatre, I took her to a Ku Klux Klan meeting in Bogalusa," Chandler said.

"The only way to fight organized crime . . . is within the framework of the Bill of Rights."

It must have impressed ber because the two were married June 30, 1965, and have a two-year-old son, Jean Henri Chandler. They live in a French Quarter apartment restored by Clay Shaw.

Chandler finds himself in an unusual situation for a newsman — that of newsmaker. But the legislative probers, if they find themselves at odds with him, had best not count on inexperience. Chandler's been there before.

JIM GARRISON

CLAY L. SHAW

DAVID L. CHANDLER

CARLOS MARCELLO

GOV. JOHN J. M'KEITHEN